



ALEXANDER GALLOWAY 2016-08-19

## IS MATERIALISM A TYPE OF IDEALISM?

LEXICON, PHILOFICTION IDEALISM, MATERIALISM, NON-LARUELLE, NON-PHILOSOPHY

I've already posted on Jameson's materialism and his theory of interpretation in light of today's new materialism and the larger ontological turn in contemporary theory. Much of the new materialism tends to elevate empirical, descriptive, even pragmatic approaches in its quest to unlock material reality, while denigrating hermeneutic pursuits as a kind of useless culturalism, or what Quentin Meillassoux in a different context labeled "correlationism." As I already described in the previous two posts, such a dramatic step is wholly incompatible with Jameson's conception of material reality. Jameson's "ontology" — disclaimers surrounding the use of this term notwithstanding — requires a reduction to material conditions, a determinism (no matter how weak or strong) of these material conditions, and indeed ultimately an accounting of the absolute horizon that conditions the world as a whole. Hence the dialectic of reduction-and-expression is absolutely necessary, as are the structures of figuration like allegory and metaphor engendered by them, along with the interpretive techniques required to parse them.

Let me offer one final post on Jameson, this time on his *Hegelianism*. This aspect has always mystified me. Jameson's primary influence is undoubtedly Marx. Yet he has never renounced the elder dialectician, nor does he have any intention of doing so. I generally hold a dim opinion of Hegelians, particularly those in whom there is no visible Marxist spark (unlike Jameson). Still, Hegel is popular again today, the academy well-stocked with Hegelians, while Marxists are only marginally less difficult to spot than, oh I don't know, fluent speakers of Esperanto.

At a young age I was taught to be skeptical of Hegelianism in all its forms. Metaphysical, idealist, bourgeois, and bound to a repugnant anthropology, Hegel was something to be avoided, something to be excised. The task of thinking, I was taught, was to identify Hegelian elements in order to invert them, remove them, or otherwise think beyond and without them. This is what Marx did. It's what Deleuze did. In fact a common thread united the kinds of thinkers I was drawn to: they all rejected Hegel.

Of course it's not that simple. And I'm realizing more and more that the *idea*, or perhaps the *concept* or *form*, is absolutely essential, even for any kind of Marxist endeavor. One might cite Deleuze and Guattari's late work, *What is Philosophy?*, in which the concept plays an important role. But the thinker who ultimately convinced me is probably Alain Badiou. I'd like to write more on Badiou in the future — possibly even a full monograph — but what convinced me is Badiou's structure of the event, particularly

how subjects are created in relation to events.

(In fact Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* was a veiled attack on Badiou, at least in part. For instance, their "Example 12" contains a summary of Badiou's *Being and Event*, which had just been published; and chapters 5 and 6 in general seem to be geared against Badiou, specifically Badiou's privileging of mathematics within philosophy. In those chapters, Deleuze and Guattari aim to separate science from philosophy by separating functions from concepts. The "event" also appears a number of times the book. And Deleuze and Guattari's refrain of "Art, Science, and Philosophy" is surprisingly similar, at least structurally, to Badiou's proposed configuration of "Art, Science, Politics, and Love.")

As I understand it, materialism requires adherence to the concept. It's why Badiou talks about hypotheses rather than facts. Or why Laruelle talks about axioms rather than worlds. But not just any concept or axiom, and certainly not all of them. Materialism stems from *one* axiom. Indeed, sometimes it is simply called *the axiom of the one*, while other times it comes under different names like identity, equality, univocity, the common, or the generic.

Materialism means adherence to the concept of the one. Each element in this definition is important, and I'll gloss them in reverse order: (1) the one means radical identity (equality, univocity, the common, etc.); (2) the concept means that such identity is asserted axiomatically/theoretically; (3) adherence means an insistence or persistence (Badiou's term is "fidelity").

We have, then, a new formulation of that old philosophical pairing "genesis and structure," or what Deleuze in his own way called "difference and repetition." Genesis refers to the being and becoming of things, how things arise or are born. Ironically structure refers to the non-becoming of things, how they adhere to a particular plan or arrangement. Materialism interprets this pairing as follows: the concept of the one ("genesis" understood as the asserted axiom of radical equality) is sustained or upheld via adherence ("structure" understood as fidelity).

In other words, there's nothing natural about materialism; materialism doesn't spring from the earth, nor is it revealed by physical laws or material reality. Whoever begins with empiricism, physicalism, naturalism, or realism will never arrive at materialism. The same is true for all the journalistic pursuits (observation, study, description, documentation, modeling) and the ideologies they require (transparency, neutrality, foundationalism, the transcendental, principles of sufficiency).

Materialism doesn't mean "pay attention to the material conditions." You're doing it wrong if you say "I want to be a neutral observer of the world" or "let's abstract scientific laws from physical phenomena." These are simply extensions of the journalistic pursuits.

Likewise, materialism is not self-grounding. It doesn't mean "the things as they naturally are." Yes, materialism is often colloquially understood as the determination of thinking by material conditions. And that's not untrue. But the only way to *ground* materialism (which is not self-grounding) is to adhere to the concept of the generic common. I'll admit it's counter-intuitive, but materialism begins from adherence to a concept, even if it results in a determination by material conditions.

Badiou is illuminating on this point, as when he speaks of communism as nothing more than "the radical inclusion of the excluded." Indeed, defined in this way materialism becomes essentially synonymous with communism — or what others sometimes call radical democracy (as opposed to the kinds of representational or parliamentary democracy that are dominant today).

How unsatisfying, then, for today's conversation. For these are simply the old debates staged anew, with those same tired criticisms of Marxism waiting on the sidelines to be trotted out once again like some ragged old warhorse: Marxism is just thinly veiled essentialism; Marxism is just thinly veiled idealism; or, worst of all, Marxism is just thinly veiled romanticism.

But isn't that the problem? To borrow a classic concept from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, perhaps a bit of strategic essentialism is precisely what is needed at this particular point in time. Strategic *idealism*, even. Criticality is so thoroughly disempowered today, the velocity of co-optation so rapid, the inversions of political desire so complete, perhaps the only truly revolutionary act available now is to promulgate a kind of strategic essentialism. It's as if to say that no sort of direct, rational process will ever yield a result, such results arising rather from those irrational processes, those untranscendable horizons that fix the very coordinates of nature itself.

Is this not what Hegel meant by "objective thoughts," by concepts becoming objects? Hegel was fond of citing that old maxim from Anaxagoras that "*nous* governs the world" (*πάντων νοῦς κρατεῖ*), arguing that nature is "a system of unconscious thought...a petrified intelligence." When the stress falls on *νοῦς*, this is undoubtedly a form of idealism. But when the stress falls on *κρατεῖ* (to rule over, to govern), a more kinetic logic takes over. Mind *governs* the world; mind *incites* the world; mind is *insurrectional*. (Badiou's theory of the subject is more or less identical.)

I suspect that the apogee of idealism, or at least the point where it ineluctably transgresses its own logic, remains the condition of subjective transformation if not self annihilation, wherein names become so suspended they appear nameless, faces so defaced they become blank, the world so remote it withdraws, like Dante's first glimpse of the great abyss, "dark and deep and filled with mist... [and] though I gazed into its pit, I was unable to discern a thing."

Was it not Husserl, that master of suspension, who summoned phenomenology to transcend the seemingly “anonymous” nature of the life-world, or Michel Henry who plumbed the depths of the ego only to find the “facelessness” of essence, to say nothing of Descartes and his hyperbolic doubt? Idealism, one will recall, is not so much the science of forms or abstractions, much less concepts or notions, but the science of *subjectivity*. Or to put it in reverse: subjectivity is always the ultimate stake in any idealism. And idealism’s own special ironic condition is one in which the invigorated potency of a pure subjective stance is, as it were, so potent that the subject becomes transformed in the wake of its own stubborn fidelity. This, again, is the lesson of Badiou, a strange dialectical creature comprising equal parts radical idealist and radical materialist. (Shall we not simply agree to call him a radicalist?) And it is the most convincing rationale he provides for Plato’s ongoing relevance today, in short, that Socrates and Rimbaud speak in one voice: *il faut changer la vie!*

And that, since Marx at least, has been the defining premise of materialism.

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